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Always looking for the next adventure

May 11, 2021



If you would have asked Nebraska native Brittany Pieke as a graduating high school senior if she would ever earn a master's degree in rural Georgia, the answer would have been a resounding no.

Pieke attended the University of Nebraska to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology. Considering a career as a teacher, she traveled to Thailand to teach English for six months. When she returned, Pieke pursued her next passion — mental wellness and mental health education. She worked at an adult psychiatric residential nonprofit agency that offered day-programming, housing assistance for homeless, group homes, and life skills and support.

"I was fighting my destiny of being a counselor," said Pieke.

It wasn't until a supervisor at the nonprofit agency asked her to consider a master's degree so that she could be eligible for promotions that she finally started to look at her options.

"It was snowing outside, and I was looking at programs that did not require the GRE because I didn't feel like I needed the GRE to be a good counselor or teach mental health," explained Pieke. "I saw Georgia Southern and decided to check it out in person. When I got off the plane, it was 70 degrees and I immediately thought, 'This is nice.'"

Pieke visited the Statesboro Campus where the [M.Ed. Counselor Education program](#) is offered and met with some of the counselor education faculty. That, coupled with the opportunity to serve as a graduate assistant for the College of Education, sealed the deal, she said.

"I told myself it would be dumb not to do it," she said. "So I went back home and said, 'Everyone, I am going to Georgia.'"

This week, Pieke graduates from the program as a clinical mental health counselor with experience working with elementary school students at Metter Elementary and clients of all ages from her internship placement at Brave Tomorrow Counseling and Consulting in Statesboro.

Beginning this fall, she will serve as a mental health counselor at an American Indian tribal school on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota.

"I said when I first got to Georgia Southern, prior to even COVID, that there would be a movement or change in mental health in schools that's different from assessments and scholarships," Pieke said. "I had a feeling about it, and I wanted to advocate for that."

Most districts in Georgia do not have mental health counselors within the schools, she explained. Rather, they employ school counselors, who are certified to assist with a broad range of healthy development among students.

"The reservation has had a very difficult time with COVID," Pieke explained. "American Indians have the highest rate of suicides compared to all other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, as well as a high rate

of substance use. The community has been taught you don't talk about mental health. It stems back to historical trauma from generations and generations. I told the school that I am not going to act like I can just fix everything. I want to give them the tools for better mental health that will be sustainable for the whole community."

When asked if moving to another new place where she doesn't know anyone for the third time in her life is intimidating, Pieke isn't fazed.

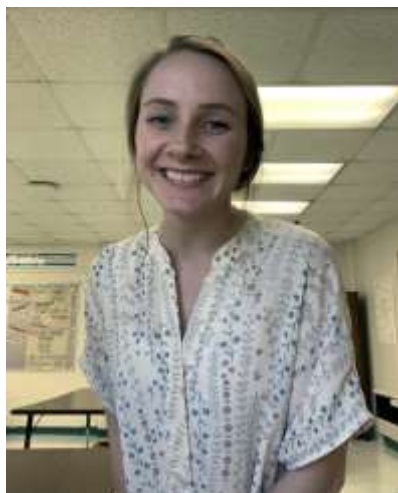
"I have always been curious about other cultures, and I love to travel," she said. "I am excited and ready to take on a new challenge. I thought I knew a lot about mental health from my previous work experience, but when I came to Georgia Southern it changed my life. I love my program, and I love all of my professors. I have had a lot of really great experiences to help me prepare."

Posted in [Student Highlights](#)

Tags: [Brittany Pieke](#), [M.Ed. Counselor Education](#)

For the love of math: COE grad pursues teacher education degree to help others understand math

May 11, 2021



Graduating from Georgia Southern University and accepting a position as a 10th grade math teacher at Screven County High School in Sylvania, Georgia, is a full-circle moment for Abigail Craig.

When Craig finished high school she wasn't interested in attending the Statesboro Campus, just 40 miles up the road from her hometown of Springfield, Georgia, or teaching. She was looking for independence and headed northwest to major in math.

There, a lackluster experience with a math professor was disappointing. However, the interaction inspired her future.

"I love math," said Craig. "It's a really cool subject to teach if you can teach it well. I sat in this intro-level statistics class and knew it well enough from high school to be OK. But my classmates were bored and confused. This isn't how math is supposed to be, and it is really what made my decision to pursue [secondary math education](#)."

After two years away, Craig circled back closer to home and transferred to Georgia Southern where she could pursue her desire to become a teacher.

"I love Georgia Southern so much, and that was a surprise," said Craig. "I really didn't want to like Southern, so that should really say more about how much I have enjoyed it here. It exceeded my expectations."

Craig's timing also allowed her to take part in the College of Education's pilot year of the [paid residency program](#). Among the first cohort of students to be placed in Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS), Craig has been working as a full-time teacher of record at Hubert Middle School since fall 2020.

The paid residency program places two teacher candidates from the University as resident teachers at a SCCPSS school to fill two vacant teaching positions and with a \$19,000 salary, along with full-time benefits as a teacher. The COE students in residency work as the teacher of record in the classroom and continue their studies at Georgia Southern for the final year of their education programs, while also receiving mentorship from a full-time teacher at the school and support from COE faculty members.

"When the University began recruiting for this program in January 2020, we did not know COVID would be coming," said Craig. "My experience during this program has been different due to COVID. We started virtual learning in the fall, working from home. We were trying to get used to the program and set up our virtual classrooms, while trying to meet other teachers in the school and our team lead — all virtually."

While maintaining a full-time position, Craig and fellow COE student DeWayne McBride-Brown who is also placed at Hubert Middle, completed required coursework for their respective programs.

"It's been crazy, but it was a really good experience," said Craig. "It has been helpful and people have been really supportive. DeWayne and I share a mentor teacher. Her whole job is just to help us out. Teachers would just stop by and check on me. The math department head would sit in on my classes and highlight what I was doing really well."

As Craig graduates this week, she will have completed her coursework and a year of her teaching career.

"I've always wanted to be a high school math teacher, and I am excited to join Screven County High in the fall," she said.

Posted in [Student Highlights](#)

Tags: [Abigail Craig](#), [Eagles EDGE](#), [Paid Residency Program](#), [Secondary Education](#)

First-generation college student overcomes medical barriers, graduates with honors

May 11, 2021



When Georgia Southern University [special education major](#) Savannah Rodriquez completed her final field placement at Sallie Zetterower Elementary School on April 30, she became the first college graduate in her family. However, there was a time that Rodriquez was told she may not graduate high school.

At the end of her sophomore year of high school, Rodriquez broke her ankle playing softball, which was followed by complications and required almost a dozen surgeries over the next two years to correct.

“I was only able to go to school for about 40 days of my senior year,” said Rodriquez. “I had to do a hospital-homebound option to complete my school work. Everyone told me that I could earn my high school diploma, but I wouldn’t get to walk across the stage and graduate with my class.”

Yet she did. While Rodriquez said it wasn’t her strongest year of high school, she was determined to graduate with her peers. She decided not to stop there.

“I knew I wanted to go to college,” she said. “I wanted to do more.”

Rodriquez enrolled as an education major at Armstrong State University and later transferred to Georgia Southern’s Statesboro Campus.

“The day before my parents brought me to Savannah, I still had a central IV line because I had been in and out of the hospital so much,” she explained. “My mother was not thrilled. To this day, she would say that day was one of the worst feelings of her life — leaving me four hours away after a two-year fiasco of trying to figure out what was going on with my ankle and my health.”

Rodriquez didn’t have time to wallow in her health issues. She was also helping to raise her fiancé Taylor’s child who she considers to be her own.

“When I started dating my fiancé, Ryan was only six months old,” she explained. “So I have always been a part of her life that she can remember.”

In 2020, Ryan and Taylor tested positive for COVID-19. Due to respiratory issues from the virus, Ryan spent months in and out of the hospital.

“At the beginning of her hospital stay, she was having a lot of respiratory issues so they were transitioning her on and off of a ventilator,” said Rodriquez. “It was scary. And yet when she came home, I was required to distance myself from her and that was so hard.”

The family moved to Hinesville to be closer to the Fort Stewart Base where Taylor is stationed and Ryan was being hospitalized. Some of her classes were hybrid, which allowed her to care for her family while completing online coursework.

Nothing was going to stop Rodriguez from finishing her degree, and she did so with honors being named a Goizueta Foundation Scholars Fund recipient in fall 2020. This week, she graduates cum laude.

“I knew the odds were not in my favor when I started college,” she said. “I was the only one in my cohort that had a child at home. I was the only one in my cohort until recently that had a fiancé. And he is military so there is a level of difficulty that adds with his field work and deployments. But my professors were amazing. Mrs. Cooper and Dr. Fisher listened to me. They have seen me cry, probably more times than any professor should, but they kept pushing and supporting me.”

For the fall, Rodriguez has accepted a position at Paulding County’s Irma C. Austin Middle School. She has also been accepted into the College of Education’s M.Ed. Special Education program and will continue her studies.

“I feel like I can do more,” she said. “I am so excited about being a Double Eagle, and I am hoping I can just keep going at Georgia Southern to earn a specialist degree and maybe a doctorate. I could be Dr. Rodriguez. If I can handle all I have over the past eight years of my life, I can handle this.”

Posted in [Student Highlights](#)

Tags: [Savannah Rodriguez](#), [Special Education](#)

Student organization gives back to local elementary SPED teachers

May 11, 2021



SCEC members pictured l-r: Abi Cliett, Leah Andrews, Ashley Lee, Kahli Crews, Katie Hiebert, Kaitlyn Dutton, Gracie Hutcheson

During the height of the pandemic, the [Student Council for Exceptional Children \(SCEC\)](#) continued to interact in its traditional advocacy efforts for students with disabilities but also became a support network for the Georgia Southern University students who were members of the group as well.

“Sometimes we just found ourselves talking about our own struggles after the business meetings were over,” said SCEC President Abigail Walker.

It was during their conversations about the efforts to support students with disabilities that one of the organization’s members, Kahli Crews, suggested a project that led the group to the decision that special education teachers needed to be “shown some love,” as Walker explained.

Work began to craft a special ‘thank you’ to the special education teachers and paraprofessionals in Bulloch County Schools, where the special education program is offered at the Statesboro Campus of Georgia Southern. The 20-something members of the SCEC put together 70 self-care kits for the nine elementary schools in the county.

“Each kit included a pencil bag, journal, candle, scrunchie or socks, and a personalized card,” said Walker. “It was important that we each hand wrote a note of thanks to these teachers who are not known by all but work so hard for our students with disabilities and inspire us as future teachers.”

Baskets were delivered in late April to the nine schools. Walker, a senior [special education](#) major, says that while she is graduating in the spring, the tradition will continue as the SCEC plans to provide recognition each semester to special education teachers, next focusing on the local middle and then high schools.

The SCEC, advised by assistant professor of special education [Karin Fisher, Ph.D.](#), is the student affiliate of the national Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Members of the SCEC are taught about advocacy efforts for individuals with disabilities on the local, state and national levels from local programming to federal laws that affect students with disabilities.

“The SCEC has helped to keep us informed about what we can do to advocate for our students with disabilities, but also it provides us with a support network,” said Walker. “We feed off of each other’s energy and are passionate about the children we are going to serve. The SCEC is always looking for ways to make a difference for students who need us, but also engage with the local community who mentor and shape us.”

For more information about SCEC contact Fisher at kfisher@georgiasouthern.edu

Posted in [Student Highlights](#)

Tags: [Abigail Walker](#), [Kahli Crews](#), [Karin Fisher](#), [Student Council for Exceptional Children](#)

Police officer to middle grades teacher: A graduate helps children from the ground up

May 11, 2021

Statesboro born-and-raised, Jason Long is a name that locals might recognize from his 23 years of experience in local law enforcement.

When plans to enter the military didn't pan out after high school, Long attempted college for a few years at Georgia Southern University, but his heart nor mind were in it. He worked in the University's Department of Parking and Transportation before realizing a desire to work with Public Safety.

Long attended the Georgia Police Academy and started his law enforcement service with the University's Police Department before moving to the Bulloch County Sheriff's Department where he spent more than 20 years serving Statesboro and Bulloch County.

"My last eight to nine years, I was in criminal investigations," Long said. "I had special training in crime scene and fingerprint identification, and also in forensic interviewing of children. It just got to the point that I couldn't do it any more. Every day I came into the office, I saw children on their worst day. It can make you feel real negative real quick."

However, law enforcement was all Long knew. It wasn't until a media specialist at a local school, Joni Aycock, asked a simple question that he realized there might be another option for him.

"With my background in crime scene investigation, I would go every year to Mill Creek Elementary and do a weeklong project with the kids called Mystery Week," he said. "We would teach them about crime scene work and looking for fingerprints. During a conversation with Joni one day, she said 'Why don't you teach?,' and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the weeks I spent at the school were some of the best weeks I had in law enforcement."

Long returned to Georgia Southern at the age of 45 to earn a bachelor's degree in [middle grades education](#) with concentrations in history and science.

"I walked into class, and everyone thought I was the professor," Long said.

But once he started his education classes with the middle grades class of 2021, Long fit right in.

"It might have been a lot harder if I had not had the group of students I was with," he said. "We've been real close the last two years. We all talk to each other regularly. If someone has a problem, if someone is upset, if someone needs something as simple as a ride or a meal, we've taken care of each other."

That's not to say, however, that the group doesn't give Long a ribbing from time to time.

"They get their jokes in," he said, laughing. "They have had their dad jokes, and they get their jabs in. But for the most part they treated me like everyone else. Some of my classmates would come over and eat with me, my daughter and wife. It gave them a family here while they were away from their homes."

For Long's final teaching placement, he served as an 8th grade social studies teacher at Southeast Bulloch Middle School in Brooklet, Georgia, where he has accepted a full-time position starting this fall. Looking back, Long says he has no doubt he made the right decision.

“During the last part of my career, I dealt a lot with high schoolers who, by the time they reached me, had already made choices that were going to negatively impact their lives forever,” he said. “I felt that with middle schoolers, I could start helping earlier to catch them at an age where I could help the ones who needed to be helped.”

Long has also realized another opportunity that he hopes to explore during his teaching career — coaching.

“With teaching and coaching, I am still serving the community like I was during my career with law enforcement,” said Long. “But now, I get to interact with children to create a positive atmosphere, and it’s so rewarding.”

Posted in [Student Highlights](#)

Tags: [Jason Long](#), [Middle Grades Education](#)